“Deaf/Hard of Hearing Students in the College Setting”

**Problem**

Since I have started attending Bloomsburg University, I have seen a few deaf/hard of hearing students around campus, and it has brought me much interest in how the college experience for these students differs from that of hearing students. As a Special Education/Early Childhood Education Major with a concentration in Deaf Education, I’ve always been interested in deaf culture and deaf inclusion. Up until I started college, the only first-hand experience I had with deaf culture was in the high school setting. It has come to my attention that not everybody has had the experience with deaf and hard of hearing people that I have, so I wanted to do research on their college experience as a way for other students to connect with them. Through interviewing both deaf/hard of hearing and hearing students, I have gained a greater understanding of how each group perceives the other, and how that affects their college experience as a whole, pertaining to making friendships, communication, college drinking, dropout rates and stereotyping.

**Background**

I started out understanding the hearing student’s experience through a number of sources: my own experience thus far as a freshman, interviewing other people within my freshman class, Nathan’s “My Freshman Year”, and an interview with my deaf friend, Min. There were many overlapping themes throughout these sources; however there were a lot of differences as well.

**Method**

I interviewed the hearing students on what they think of deaf students when they first see them, how they know they are deaf, and how likely they would be to approach them. Min’s interview consisted of him telling me how he felt around hearing students, whether he would drink in college to make friends with said hearing students, and how communication is so limited with them for him.

**Findings**

From “My Freshman Year”, I gathered that many groups that were considered “different” (whether due to race or disability) were isolated to people like themselves. Depending on whether or not deaf students have had interaction with other deaf people as children, it can affect their identity exploration and even lead to isolation and loneliness later in life (Lukomski J, 2007). This can lead to dropping out of college, in most extreme cases. However, this information was gathered from Nathan *observing* students, while I *interviewed* students, and I acquired a very different response. When I interviewed people within my freshman class, I found something completely opposite. They said they “would approach” deaf students and would “try and find a way to communicate without talking”. This goes against what Nathan implies about hearing students in the college setting.

I then interviewed a deaf friend of mine who will coincidentally be attending Bloomsburg University for the first time starting spring semester. I asked him questions about how he felt around hearing students, if it was hard to make friends with hearing students, and what method of communication he resorts to when a person doesn’t know sign language. His answers were as follows:

“*I just feel normal. Hearing people tend to misunderstand easily when I use gestures. The vibe I get from them is something different than I have in the past, meaning I wouldn't continue chatting with them unless they are familiar with being around with deaf people.* *It isn’t hard to make friends with hearing students if they know American Sign Language, but that is not always the case. I tend to use my smartphone to use as communication with them if they don’t know ASL, or I use gestures sometimes.*”

When I asked Min about college drinking, and his likeliness to drink as a means of common ground with hearing students, he told me he “would because life is short”. When asked if he thought deaf students drank a lot in college he replied: “Of course they do, just like hearing people, because it’s college life.” In a journal I found staggering statistics on college drinking among deaf/hard of hearing students. In a survey of these students, 91.4% of them said they consumed alcohol in the past year, and 91.7% of male students and 84.3% of female students saw drinking as central to their social lives (Mason T, Schiller J, 2009). Comparing this to the student I interviewed, this information is accurate.

Another study informed me that the dropout rate among deaf college students is high, due to limited personal resources and lack of socialization (Albertini J, Kelly R, Matchett M, 2012). With greater social satisfaction comes persistence, and without it, students lose interest and end up dropping out. My deaf student that I interviewed was surprised by this information when I told him, and he said it can be due to more than just that: “money issues, personal reasons and others.”

When asked about stereotyping, he felt very strongly on the matter:

“*I hate stereotypes in general. People need to get to know others before they judge. And I understand that there is a communication barrier between a lot of deaf/hard of hearing students and hearing students, but there is still no reason to judge. I cannot talk at all. However, I am told that I am an intelligent person and have a lot to offer the world.*”

**Discussion**

I think the reason that the information collected through Nathan’s observations and the information I gathered from my interviews is so different is because as college students we like to think of ourselves as entering a new time in our lives where we will be more outgoing and friendly, when in reality, the shadow of our former self still raises to the surface. Change in ourselves for the better is what we hope for, and most of the time we end up not changing at all, or if not, only a little bit.

I know from my own personal experience with deaf/hard of hearing students that I will not immediately go up and approach them because I feel insecure in my own American Sign Language abilities, but eventually try and make an introduction for myself.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, deaf/hard of hearing students have a very similar college experience to that of hearing students. They all want the same thing: to be accepted and to excel academically. However, the language barrier poses many problems in a college where the majority of the students and teachers are hearing. Only one question remains unanswered: “If both sides are willing to approach each other, then why isn’t it happening as often as it should?” Research on this subject has yet to be conducted.